Business center in the works

Florida Today

Officials on Friday broke ground on the Technological Research and Development Authority's Business Innovation Center in Melbourne, saying they hope it will be the catalyst for hundreds of new high-tech jobs in the future.

The $3.8 million business-incubation center -- funded by local, state and federal money -- offers qualified entrepreneurs breaks on things such as rent, utilities and taxes. Completion is scheduled for April 2007.

Incubators are meant to help entrepreneurs get their businesses off the ground. After that, they're supposed to move out and keep their company growing -- hopefully within the county.

"The plan is to get (businesses) in and get them out as quickly as we can, so we can make room for other businesses," said Frank Kinney, executive director of the Technological Research and Development Authority, or the TRDA, as it's better known.

"It's an incubator," Kinney added. "It's not a flophouse for businesses. It's not a place for them to get cheap rent."

About 75 people -- TRDA alum, lawmakers, and representatives from the business and education community -- attended Friday morning's groundbreaking ceremony off NASA Boulevard.

A few speakers made reference to this week's news that Brevard County was ranked No. 1 by the Los Angeles-based Milken Institute's Best Performing Cities Index in a measurement of where U.S. jobs are being created. The Milken Institute is an economic think tank.

"We want to stay No. 1, and that's what this is about," said U.S. Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Indialantic, who helped secure much of the federal funding for the Melbourne incubator. "By having this kind of investment, we're going to be able to continue to grow small

businesses."

There are about 1,000 small-business incubators in the United States, Kinney said. The Melbourne incubator will be the TRDA's second. The Florida/NASA Business Incubation Center in Titusville opened in 1996.

TRDA officials originally pursued a site on University Boulevard in south Melbourne near Florida Tech for the second incubator, but it backed off when land costs became prohibitive.

Officials then began talks with the Melbourne Airport Authority for a site on airport property.

Jack Ryals, chairman of the Melbourne Airport Authority, said the TRDA's mission meshed with the airport's desire to be known as an economic development center with a vibrant, high-tech work force.

Tenants leasing space at Melbourne International Airport property include GE Energy/GE Transportation, Harris Corp., Northrop Grumman Integrated Systems and Rockwell Collins Inc.

"The TRDA and this business incubator fits perfectly with the airport's role as an economic engine in the area," Ryals said.

Tenants at the Titusville center have nothing but good things to say about the program.

Bhargav Gajjar, chief executive of a small startup called Space Robotics Corp., said the incubator helped him network NASA officials.

"Now I'm able to access a lot of NASA facilities," said Gajjar, who builds robotic systems.

"Without the incubator, I think that would be very hard. It would almost be like a long-distance learning program."

Bruce Young, chief executive officer of Laserlure Inc., a fledging company preparing to roll out a line of laser-powered, computer-

controlled fishing lures this summer, said he's paying $250 a month for a small office -- utilities and phone included -- and also has access to a conference room and experts to help him with his business plan.

If it wasn't for the incubator, Young said his overhead expense probably would be between $1,200 and $3,000 a month.

"The whole idea with these incubators is that you have some place to work that doesn't eat up all your money in the beginning," said Young, who also is developing a line of "adaptive" golf clubs for people with prosthetics.

"When you see the people in incubators, they're not rich," Young said. "They just have rich ideas."

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TRDA Business Innovation Center breaks ground